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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a new approach devised by the Harvard Principals' Center for improving professional development for practicing principals. The approach is predicated on a novel conception of principals as life-long learners and on the proposition that principals themselves can and should assume major responsibility for all aspects of their professional development. Principals themselves were enlisted as the architects, designers, and engineers of the center. An advisory board consisting of 19 principals and 4 Harvard faculty determines the content and format of activities and plans each half-year's program around their common needs. The results of four years' experience with this approach are described. The premises of the program have been fully validated, in that principals demonstrated rigor and inventiveness in planning programs for their colleagues, a constructive dialogue has developed between university and practitioners, and principals have chosen to participate voluntarily, and do so with enthusiasm. As a consequence, a new model for professional development is emerging: the center helps principals reflect on their work, clarify their thinking through articulation, and converse with others to better understand and hence improve their practice. The success of the program is evident in its rapid growth and the spawning of similar centers elsewhere. (TE)

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PRINCIPAL CENTERED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the
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Chicago, Illinois, April 1985

Roland S. Barth

> Too often in the past we have designed systems to meet all kinds of exacting requirements except the requirement that they contribute to the fulfillment and growth of the participants.
>
> John W. Gardner

The school principal has been rediscovered. A growing body of literature suggests that behind every successful school is a successful principal, and behind every unsuccessful school is an unsuccessful principal. For better or worse principals have a disproportionate influence upon what teachers teach and students learn.

There seem to be three major policy implications visible across the land: strengthen the preservice training of aspiring principals by improving certification requirements and formal academic course work; improve the process of selecting principals, improve and increase the professional development opportunities for practicing principals.

It is the last of these in which I have been actively engaged for the past several years and which I would like to consider here. The professional invigoration of the nation's principals deserves our attention because these individuals have a profound influence upon their schools, they will retain their positions for nearly two decades, and because surrounding each

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principal are conditions promising for learning--difficulties, a context for resolving them, and a person who wants them resolved. As one Boston area principal recently put it, "Problems are to a school administrator like dandelions are to the spring lawn."

Professional development for principals has been described by an official of one of the national principals' associations as a "wasteland". Principals take assorted courses at universities. They attend episodic inservice activities within their school systems and struggle to elevate professional literature to the top of the sedimentary pile of papers on their desks. Staff development for principals designed by state departments, large school systems, and some universities is more coherent and concerted. Many of these activities stem from a common set of assumptions and draw upon a common logic:

a) find schools where pupils are achieving beyond what might be predicted by their backgrounds;
b) observe principals in those schools and find out what they are doing;
c) identify these behaviors as "desirable traits";
d) devise training programs to develop these traits in all principals;
e) enlist principals into these programs;
f) to the extent these principals successfully acquire these traits, students in their schools will also come to achieve at a level beyond what might be predicted by their social class, race and family background.

I find this model simple, straightforward, compelling, and

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logical. Its only major flaw is that it doesn't seem to work very well. I suspect there may be several reasons. The assumption that "strong leadership" is whatever results in high student test scores suggests a very limited and I think demeaning view of both students and principals. Good education is more than good scores and good leadership is more than generating good scores. And conditions in one school are seldom similar to those in another. To treat "schools" as a generic class is easier said than done. A third reason is that people who run things, as principals run schools, don't want to be themselves run--especially badly. Principals have built up antibodies to attempts by others to remediate them. They resist fiercely, if covertly, a deficiency model of staff development which tells only "here's what I expect of you" and asks only "how well are you doing it?" Many attend, few succumb, fewer learn. And finally, even if principals have been successfully trained by means of these staff development activities, without sustained feedback and skillful coaching, little comes of it. The linkages from principal behavior in a workshop setting to principal behavior in a school to teacher behavior to student learning are convoluted, and tenuous indeed.

These may be among the reasons why the logical model of staff development for principals encounters difficulty--and the reasons I believe there is a pressing need for different conceptions of staff development for principals and for a wider variety of inventive models for promoting their professional growth.

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While the questions "what should principals know and be able to do?" and "how can we get them to know and do it?" seem like the obvious, correct questions, the Harvard Principals' Center has been asking and exploring a different question: under what conditions will school principals become committed, sustained, life-long learners in their important work? School principals are better known as directors of the learning of others than as learners themselves. Indeed, conversations with superintendents, teachers, and staff developers suggest that school principals are not educable. And to be sure, principals often appear gifted and talented in their capacity to subvert, fend off, and forget the best attempts by others to staff develop them.

In our work at the Principals' Center it is becoming clearer just why it is so difficult for school leaders to become learners. One difficulty is, of course, "I don't have time." More is expected with less. "If I participate in that teachers' math workshop the schedules for next semester and the phone messages from parents will go unattended. "I don't have time" is for principals, like all of us, another way of saying other things are more important and perhaps more comfortable. So the leader's learning takes a back seat.

A second impediment is principals' experience as learners. Few come to professional development activities without baggage from the past. District inservice and university course work, for instance, have left principals unsatisfied and turned off. One reason principals resist new learning opportunities is that they have been there before and found what's there wanting. Few

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retain much confidence that staff development will be engaging let alone helpful to them in running their schools.

Third, for a principal to be a learner is immoral. The purpose of schools is to promote student learning. Taking $100 from the school budget to join the Principals' Center is tantamount to snatching bread from the mouths of babes. Think of what the school could do with $100--teacher aides, books, magic markers. And think of what could be done at school during those two hours of workshop. Principals are public servants whose place is to serve, not to be served. An all too-embedded belief in the school culture.

Another obstacle to the principal becoming a learner is that by publicly engaging in learning principals reveal themselves as flawed. One principal told me that when he left his district to come to a Harvard Summer Institute another said to him, only half in jest, "I'm glad the superintendent chose the one who needed it the most." The world out there expects principals to know how to do it. Principals often pretend to. A few even believe it. Thus principals find themselves forbidden not to know. To become a learner is to admit that the screening committee and superintendent made a mistake and suggests that the principal is not one with whom parents can entrust their children.

It is also inappropriate for the principal to be a learner. Learning always begins one rung on the ladder below the teacher. Teachers want children to learn but see their own learning as less necessary. Principals want teachers to learn but don't feel that a math workshop is appropriate for them. Superintendents

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want principals to shape up but few engage seriously in their own professional development. And so it goes. The moral order of the school universe places the principal in authority as knower. Principal as learner is out of place.

Finally, if principals engage in a learning experience and learn something--a new way of thinking about curriculum, a new interpersonal skill, a new idea about improving school climate--they are then faced with having to do something with it. They have to use it. Principals are rewarded for learning by additional work. Some principals contemplating joining the Center hesitate because they fear membership will further deplete both their time and energy, already in too short supply. It seems to be one of the paradoxes of professional development that it can be both energy and time depleting and energy and time replenishing.

Given the importance of the principalship, of the professional develoment of principals, given the lack of success with principals' staff development, and the host of impediments which interfere with leaders becoming learners, what is the Harvard Principals' Center doing? A major proposition underlies our efforts. Principals will be seriously involved in all aspects of their professional development. It has been our belief that the critical element in principals' learning, indeed, in anyone's learning, is ownership. Learning must be something principals do, not something others do to or for them. This has

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led us to explore the questions "under what conditions will principals become learners?" and "under what conditions will principals assume major responsibility for their learning?" Together, these two questions generate a third question, "what conditions will principals devise to encourage and support their own learning?"

The idea of principals' serious involvement in their own development is deceptive. It does not appear to be particularly noteworthy or fruitful. But we are finding that the consequences of taking this proposition seriously and acting upon it for four years is leading to some noteworthy conversations and fruitful results.

Our conviction that a principals' center must be principal-centered led to enlisting 28 Boston area principals as architects, designers, and engineers of the Center. After a half year of meetings, discussions and deliberations this group came up with several building blocks for the Center, each of which to this day is surprisingly in place, attached to the cornerstone of principals' involvement and ownership.

There are no more important decisions affecting principals' staff development than those determining the content and format of activities. While many staff developers may be preoccupied with the discrepancy between what the principal is doing and what they would like the principal to do. Principals, on the other hand care about narrowing the discrepancy between what they are doing and what they want to be able to do. A governance structure of an Advisory Board chaired by a principal joined by

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18 other Boston area principals and four Harvard Faculty ensures the major voice about program will be the principals'. The Board meets for three hours, one evening each month, to create the program for the following half year. These discussions follow a pattern: brainstorm about issues, themes, problems, about which principals want to know more (e.g. "new technologies," "dealing with diversity,"); sharpen up questions for each theme (e.g. "how can a new Apple II be used both as a management tool and an instructional tool within an elementary school?"; "how can the principal come to see and use differences of age, gender, race, ability within a school as an opportunity for school improvement rather than as a problem to be avoided,); then the Board grapples with the question, "who knows what about these questions?" and begins to identify consultants, university professors and principals as possible resources. At this point members form groups around each theme which develop the idea, select resource persons, and devise formats. Finally, a staff member of the center, often a doctoral student interested in the principalship, takes the plans and implements them. This includes inviting speakers, securing a room, supplying wine and cheese, evaluating the sessions, and thanking the presenter.

Many observers questioned the wisdom of turning responsibility for principals' program over to principals, fearing that their decisions, like those made by high schoolers in an "open campus" might be frivolous, irresponsible and self interested. This tension took the form of a question, "will the Principals' Center offer what principals want or what principals

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need?". An interesting question indeed, and right to the heart of the matter.

Principals, on the other hand, with a long history as recipients of others' prescriptions, were suspicious that the Center would be a disquised attempt by Harvard to "inservice" them. More of the logical model--under Crimson wraps. Over time suspicions abated as principals demonstrated rigor and inventiveness in planning programs for their colleagues and as others became caught up in their enthusiasm and in the rationale behind their judgments. The list of themes featured at the Center would probably pass muster in most quarters: "curriculum improvement", "making use of the national reports and studies", "human development and its implications for schools", "leadership and effective schools". Are principals who take part in these themes engaging in what they want or in what they need? Is involvement in a program supporting principals' visits to one another's schools what they want or what they need? The question no longer has much meaning. The views of school and university have merged as both have joined the same conversation. Over time wants and needs have become indistinguishable.

Principals then, have had serious involvement in planning the Center and in developing the program for the Center. Each also makes the critical decision about whether to become a <u>resource</u> for other principals. Professional journals and research agendas are dominated by university voices and all too often conversations between university and school people (especially when held in the university) are also

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university-dominated. If universities don't elicit the voices of school practitioners, neither does the culture of a school system encourage sharing among principals where they find themselves competitors for scarce recognition and resources.

We are finding that adults who work in schools carry with them extraordinary insights about leadership, curriculum staff development, child psychology, and parent involvement which are seldom explicit for them, let alone accessible to others. For us the issue then is not whether school people know much of value but how to reveal this abundance of thinking and practice so it may be more widely available to improve schools. We have engaged in a long and difficult struggle against the belief held by many practitioners that one's knowledge, skills, and success in schools is a private matter, best kept from potential competitors or critics. In other words, best kept from most others. And a struggle against the taboo in many school settings against distinguishing oneself or even appearing to distinguish oneself with respect to others by declarations of "I know how to...?" And a struggle against the fear on the part of both presenting and listening principals that when principals talk they will reveal not craft knowledge but war stories.

In our attempts to involve principals as givers as well as receivers of ideas, services, and skills, we are finding that the process of being helpful to others is one of the most powerful ways of generating respect and recognition--both for oneself and for those one helps. Being invited to share ideas and experiences with colleagues conveys to a principal

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several messages: the Center believes you know something that would be valuable to others; what you know is sufficiently important that we will convene other principals so they may talk with you; we value your knowledge and are willing to pay $100 for you to share it.

More and more principals are acknowledging what they know and finding ways of making it available to others. Observing colleagues successfully leading groups and making presentations encourages others to follow. The pump is now primed and all of us are coming to realize--and celebrate--not one but two tributaries which flow into the knowledge base of school improvement: the research literature from the academic community and the craft knowledge from the school community. The former is often a mile wide and an inch deep; the latter is often an inch wide but a mile deep. Together they offer remarkable depth and breadth.

And principals decide whether to participate in the Center's activities as members. Each principal decides to spend $100 to become a member for a year and in which of 60 or 70 events to take part. Initially, some superintendents offered to support participation of their principals if they could decide which principals to send and for what sort of "remediation". Even a few PTA's offered to send principals if we would promise to "fix" them! The Board has resisted these offers, as much as they might have contributed to membership and budget. By placing the decision for participation squarely upon each principal's shoulders, indeed, by making it difficult through costs of time

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and dollars, we find that those who participate want to participate. Activities are, therefore, refreshingly free of back row cynics and critics. With the choice to attend comes an openness to learn. The Board remains adamant in believing that if the Center is any good others will come.

Amidst great fanfare we hung out our shingle in the fall of 1981. The Center's first activity was attended by five persons--four of whom were members of the Center staff! Concern that principals would respond to this kind of staff development was heightened. But by the end of the first year the Center enjoyed nearly 100 members. But another concern surfaced: the Center was becoming an elitist organization for only "the top ability group" of principals. As had been the case with many teacher centers, "those who need it the most won't come; those who come already have it." We have watched and waited. Today the Center has over 700 members, perhaps ten percent of whom attend each session. Membership is generally representative of: men, women, beginning principals, veterans, elementary, middle, and high schools--and a cross section of "ability groups." Our experience now suggests that every principal has some of "it" and every principal needs and wants more of "it". A member of the Boston School Committee observed one day that more Boston principals were at that session, voluntarily, than attend their compulsory meetings in Boston!

There are other important decisions in which principals have had a major hand. There is a great deal to learn using the school house as locus and context. But principals have preferred the

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more neutral, protected university setting for their reflections and conversations, a place where a secretary is not likely to intrude with a worried look and message in hand. Principals find that a university-based Center provides a contemplative place in the ivory tower for school people as well as for academics.

The education business seems to thrive as a sorting enterprise, always attempting to narrow the range of human characteristics represented in a group. The Board has firmly tilted in the other direction, towards heter geneity and diversity. Few activities are "grouped" by, for instance, elementary, middle, or high school affiliation. The Center has thereby come to occupy a rather unique place in the experience of principals. Currently members bring with them extraordinary variety and background of ideas and experiences. About one third of the members are not principals at all. Superintendents, teachers, board members, university faculty and students attend sessions in considerable numbers. Increasingly we find conversations which begin at the Center continue afterwards among these groups back in the schools.

Too many attempts at professional development for principals are attempts at group growth. All the principals in a district, for instance, receive inservice on PBBS on Thursday afternoon. The assumption is they all need these skills before Thursday and will have them after Thursday. Principals, like other learners, have preferred learning styles, different attention spans, interests, and needs. Consequently, the Board attempts to vary activities along several important dimensions: e.g. those led by

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principals, Harvard faculty, graduate students, and outside consultants; long term and short term, small groups, large groups, and individual participation; low risk activities (large group addresses), modest risk (small group discussions) and high risk (writing groups, pairing to exchange school visits). Principals can match their styles as practitioners and as learners to these different formats. In the process many are learning something about themselves as learners as well as new content and skills.

In many ways these and other decisions made by principals are obvious to students of staff development and adult growth. Obvious perhaps, but surprisingly uncommon in the lives of principals and in the halls of most universities. We are finding that when principals take major responsibility for their own learning, not only principals, but everyone wins.

As an organization, the Principals' Center is now making a transition from problems of planning, creation, and first approximation to current problems of growth, expansion and refinement of purpose. The issues with which we are now grappling constitute a weighty agenda:

How much "ownership" are principals willing and able to take for the Center? Fund raising? Policy questions: Design of program? Participation as resources? Licking stamps and mailing newsletters?

How can Harvard students and faculty become more involved without losing principals' ownership of program and policy?

What is the distinction between principals' sharing their

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craft knowledge and principals telling war stories? How can the latter be transformed into the former?

Should more activities be held out in the schools as well as at the University? Should we focus on one shot events or move towards more coherent series of events?

Should a limit be placed on the number of members? What is optimal? Should we work to include more school leaders from independent and parochial schools?

Should we offer academic credit for members who participate? Should we consider other forms of extrinsic rewards?

How can we individualize and personalize an organization with over 700 members?

How should we respond to requests to "franchise" the principals' center idea? Is there a "Harvard model"?

How can principals' involvement in their own development become energy-generating as well as energy-depleting?

How might the Center be evaluated?

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Four Years Later

Over the years we have come to believe that the professional development of principals is an important and noble goal in its own right. Principals are people, first class citizens of a community of learners entitled to education's most precious commodity. Yet the Center was established in the belief that by replenishing the professional lives of school principals, the experiences of students in their schools would be enriched. We often ask ourselves whether the Principals' Center is, in fact, improving schools and having a demonstrable influence upon pupils. What difference does it make to the life and learning of a fourth grader in the Watertown Public Schools, to the climate of the school and the morale of its teachers, that the principal participates in the Harvard Principals' Center two or three times each month? The research design which might answer this question boggles the mind.

We suspect there are many ripple effects of the Center's work in the schools. For instance, we can begin to see the crucial influence of principals' modelling learning in ways which are visible, energized, sustained and self-directed. The principal as learner has not been lost upon their schools as one principal observed: "my staff this year is enrolling in record numbers in the local staff development program. Whether this is a reflection of my own participation in the Center and to my own new commitment to learning, I'm not sure. I think it is."

Do as I do as well as as I say is a powerful formula in

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transforming schools from places where there are older, learned people and younger learning people, into a community of learners where everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner. Or as one principal put it so well in her writing, "learning is not something like chickenpox--a childhood disease that makes you itch for a while, then leaves you immune for the rest of your life."

But like most staff development attempts we can offer little evidence at this time which directly links members' participation with outcomes in their schools such as pupil achievement. We are beginning to ask participants what they may take away from the Center, how they make use of it, and to what effect. But we remain a long way from establishing any linkage between change in schools and pupils as a function of participation in the Center. That's an astonishing admission, which might turn off many a funding source, curtail affiliation with universities, and sour state departments of education and state legislatures.

What then <u>can</u> we say the Center is accomplishing after four years and over one-half million dollars? There are no simple answers, particularly when we keep in mind that our pluralistic constitutency includes principals, university administrators, faculty, and graduate students, each of which has quite different purposes for the center. I think we've come a long way from the extended pause with which we greeted one Boston principal four years ago who asked, "why should I join? What do I get for my $100? It would do more to advance my career to contribute $100 to the re-election campaign of a member of the Boston School

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Committee than to join the Principals' Center."

We can say that principals are voluntarily joining the Center, attending in large numbers the different activities, reporting enthusiasm for what they experience and learn, carrying these conversations back to their schools and systems, and establishing and sustaining their own professional networks. The many principals who transport Center activities back to their own faculty meetings are experiencing professional growth which releases and generates energy as well as consumes it.

Despite the good rhetoric about the importance of school principals offered in the effective schools research and in current national reports we find that few principals feel valued or recognized in their work. That's hardly what PTA's, superintendents, school boards and the press convey to principals each day. Yet, of all the pressing needs of public school practitioners, none is more vital than the need for personal and professional recognition from a society which values the product of education far more than it values those who are committed to providing it.

The concept of a principals' center seems capable of providing considerable recognition and a sense of professionalism for principals. Recognition comes from inviting principals to share their craft knowledge with colleagues, from empowering principals with major decisions affecting the Center, from helping them write about their important work, from offering affiliation with a major university which enlists them as speakers in classes, members of boards, and recently, has offered

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several principals faculty appointments.

And recognition has come to a growing number of principals from around the country who have served as "visiting practitioners" at the Center for periods ranging from eight weeks to a full year, contributing their skills to the staff and providing resources to members while they reflect and write about their professional experience. Some of these school leaders have returned home to establish centers of their own. If the Principals' Center has helped beleaguered principals by validating, dignifying, respecting, and supporting a profession laboring under both diminished public confidence and diminshed self confidence feel recognized as important members of society, much has been accomplished.

Although never in the front of early proposals or even in the backs of the minds of those of us putting the Center together, it is clear that the Center has supported the evolution of a community of school leaders in the Boston area. Four years ago few suburban principals talked with urban principals; elementary folks didn't talk with high school folks, even within the same district; men administrators didn't talk with women administrators, public school personnel didn't talk with their private school counterparts; and no one talked with those in parochial schools. Now, conversations among these groups are frequent and continuous, as one member suggests:

> I find fellowship. The center provides an opportunity for each of us to air our concerns, share our thoughts, develope ideas, and come away enriched by the experience. We begin to realize that no matter which community we represent--Boston, Brookline, or Groton--there is a communality. As a result I no longer

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feel isolated.

As the bridges of generic issues begin to transcend professional chasms, members of this community of school leaders are recognizing a shared sense of purpose. Recently, a Boston high school principal was featured in an hour long television documentary. The next day I happened to be at the Center and found this program the center of discussion. Two things were clear: almost every principal had watched, and almost every principal had cheered for one of their own. Both unthinkable four years ago. Another principal captured the essence of this invisible community in different words: "I haven't had a chance to attend any activities this year, but just knowing that the Center is there gives new meaning to my work."

This rich community has had the effect not only of creating support systems in the greter Boston area, infusing conversations around a table with fresh vigor, but of expanding the repertoire of different responses to similar school problems. And that is the essence of what principals seek as they strive to improve their leadership.

The Center has been felt in another way. It has become a powerful agent of school improvement and staff development--for the Harvard Graduate School of Education. A few years back, Harvard, like most research universities found itself at some distance from schools. It seemed to many in the university that school people wanted to improve things without changing them very much; from the point of view of school people, university professors were offering to change things but without improving

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them very much. The Center has served as a kind of Trojan Horse wheeled inside the walls of the city. Out of the Horse have sprung 700 real, live school practitioners who make an undeniable presence in elevators, in classrooms, in the library, and in conversations. That the Center has helped the faculty and students at Harvard connect with schools is not to be taken lightly.

And, four years later, the Center can point to many offspring. Through a grant from the Babcock Foundation, the Center is collaborating with the North Carolina Institute for Principals in a program which exchanges ideas, resource personnel, and principals. We have been deeply involved in a national network of principal centers which helps link and strengthen isolated attempts to promote the professional development of principals. The network includes a newsletter, a directory of centers and annual national "conversations" among centers. Each summer a ten day Principals' Center Institute on the "Principal and School Improvement" is held at Harvard for about 100 school leaders from across the country. A smaller institute will be held in the summer of 1985 in London for thirty-five school heads from the European Council of International Schools. And the Center has created a principal certification program to help prepare those considering this career.

And, four years later, we can begin to see the outlines of a conceptual model for the professional development of principals quite different from the venerable logical training model:

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REFLECT ON PRACTICE → ARTICULATE → BETTER UNDERSTAND → IMPROVE
PRACTICE PRACTICE PRACTICE

The logic is not complicated: if we can devise ways to help principals reflect thoughtfully and systematically upon the work they do, analyze that work, clarify their thinking through spoken and written articulation, and engage in conversations with others about that work, they will better understand their complex schools, the tasks confronting them, and their own styles as leaders. Understanding practice is the single most important precondition for improving practice.

The Principals' Center is becoming an organization which attempts to improve the quality of life and learning in schools by encouraging different ways of thinking about common problems; by transforming school problems into opportunities for school improvement; by encouraging clarification of assumptions guiding practice; by offering opportunities for shared problem-solving and reflection; and by providing a context of mutual support and trust in which personal relationships may be established and developed.

The Center is beginning to demonstrate that there <u>are</u> conditions under which school practitioners are not only educable but will take responsibility for and voluntarily engage in activities which will promote their learning. In doing so, members telegraph a vital message: principals can become learners and <u>thereby</u> leaders in their schools.

So, although we cannot demonstrate a rise in the achievement test scores of that fourth grader in Watertown as a function of

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the principal's participation in the Principals' Center, we believe other outcomes are every bit as important. And I suspect these outcomes may be antecedents, perhaps preconditions for fundamental improvement in our schools such as pupil achievement. Now after four years we have even greater confidence that fostering a climate of reflection, learning and cooperation among educators outside their schools will inevitably strengthen reflection, learning, and cooperation among adults and students within the schools.

Roland S. Barth, for many years a public school principal, established the Principals' Center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1981. He is now Co-director of the Center and Senior Lecturer on Education at Harvard University. He is the author of numerous articles and of Run School Run and Open Education and the American School.

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